

Whose Views Made the News? Media Coverage and the March to War in Iraq

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Criticism of the news media's performance in the months before the 2003 Iraq War has been profuse. Scholars, commentators, and journalists themselves have argued that the media aided the Bush administration in its march to war by failing to air a wide-ranging debate that offered analysis and commentary from diverse perspectives. As a result, critics say, the public was denied the opportunity to weigh the claims of those arguing both for and against military action in Iraq. We report the results of a systematic analysis of every ABC, CBS, and NBC Iraq-related evening news story—1,434 in all—in the 8 months before the invasion (August 1, 2002, through March 19, 2003). We find that news coverage conformed in some ways to the conventional wisdom: Bush administration officials were the most frequently quoted sources, the voices of anti-war groups and opposition Democrats were barely audible, and the overall thrust of coverage favored a pro-war perspective. But while domestic dissent on the war was minimal, opposition from abroad—in particular, from Iraq and officials from countries such as France, who argued for a diplomatic solution to the standoff—was commonly reported on the networks. Our findings suggest that media researchers should further examine the inclusion of non-U.S. views on high-profile foreign policy debates, and they also raise important questions about how the news filters the communications of political actors and refracts—rather than merely reflects—the contours of debate.

Keywords Iraq, mass media, indexing, public opinion

Almost from the time U.S. military units began their “shock and awe” assault on Baghdad in March 2003, controversy has swirled around the performance of American mass media in the run-up to the Iraq War. Especially after it became clear in the months following the invasion that coalition forces had failed to uncover credible evidence of weapons of mass destruction or recent programs to develop them, critics and many news practitioners themselves began a period of intense scrutiny, fueled by the perception that mainstream media failed in their responsibilities to democracy. According to these critiques, news outlets before the invasion did not air a wide-ranging and honest debate grounded in carefully vetted facts, and they failed to offer citizens analysis and commentary from diverse policy perspectives.

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Watchdog groups have published extensive reports arguing that media failures aided the Bush administration's march toward a disastrous and costly war based on flimsy evidence, superficial analysis, and unwarranted assumptions regarding Iraq's weapons capabilities and ties to international Islamist terrorist organizations; post-invasion political, economic, and security arrangements; and other issues. The nonpartisan Center for Public Integrity, for example, documented 935 false statements (in addition to hundreds more questionable claims) by top administration officials before the war regarding the threat from Iraq (Lewis & Reading-Smith, 2008). The bulk of these assertions, critics have charged, were broadcast widely by U.S. media with little or no investigation of their credibility, and few rebuttals from war skeptics or dissenters. The growing consternation even prompted the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* to publish self-reflective statements that, while stopping short of apologies for reporting failures, acknowledged that their performances could have been better (*New York Times*, 2004; Kurtz, 2004). Some critics have begun to question the mainstream media's most cherished modern conventions, arguing that norms calling for "balance" and "objectivity" tend paradoxically to give the upper hand to official sources trumpeting dubious claims (e.g., Cunningham, 2003). And a slew of popular books and documentaries have argued that the media failed dismally in the run-up to the invasion.¹

These criticisms are unsurprising in light of the dominant theoretical perspective in the political communication literature: in the absence of elite conflict—a situation that prevailed in the United States in the period before the Iraq War, as many Democrats muted their opposition to the invasion and others actively supported the Bush administration—media coverage of foreign policy debates will produce an essentially one-sided information flow. News content, in Bennett's (1990) language, is "indexed" to the positions articulated in elite debate, and only when institutional political actors vigorously challenge one another will coverage contain a diversity of viewpoints.

But because there has been little systematic and comprehensive research into pre-invasion media coverage, we simply do not know the extent to which dissenting voices were "shut out" (Massing, 2004) of the news and, thus, the extent to which the Iraq case validates existing theory.² Better empirical evidence that details the content of the news is required to verify widespread claims that the media helped lead the country into war, and to enrich our theoretical accounts of the mass media's role in foreign policy debates and the shaping of public opinion more generally. Moreover, the pre-war period presents an opportunity to examine the argument that voices emanating from outside the United States play an increasingly important part in media coverage of foreign policy in the post-Cold War era (Althaus, 2003; Althaus, Eddy, Entman, & Phalen, 1996; Entman, 2004; Livingston & Eachus, 1996).

In this article, we make two contributions. First, we offer a theoretical perspective that amplifies existing arguments to make the case that nondomestic voices are more relevant in American foreign policy debates than often supposed. In particular, we highlight the potential importance of foreign elite discourse in situations where little dissent emanates from U.S. political elites, such as the Iraq case. Second, we provide a systematic examination of every ABC, CBS, and NBC Iraq-related evening news story—1,434 in all—in the 8 months before the invasion. To our knowledge, there is no comparable study of American mass media coverage in this period. This analysis allows us to examine whether existing theories accurately account for the contours of pre-war media content, and to make precise statements about the extent to which voices supporting and opposing the Iraq invasion found their way into the mainstream media.

In many ways, our findings support both the conventional wisdom about pre-Iraq War coverage and the broad outlines of the indexing model: Bush administration officials were the most frequently quoted sources in the news, the voices of anti-war groups and opposition Democrats were barely audible, and the overall thrust of coverage supported a pro-war perspective. At the same time, the news was less “lopsided” than often claimed. While domestic dissent on the war was minimal, opposition from abroad was commonly reported on the broadcast networks. Iraqi regime officials, United Nations officials, and leaders of foreign countries such as France, who preferred a diplomatic solution to the standoff, were given considerable airtime. While it is likely that those opinions were accorded less credibility by many Americans than the views of U.S. officials, the evidence does not suggest that the mass media ignored the anti-war perspective. Even as domestic political elites did not mount a strong challenge to the Bush administration’s push for war, the opposition case was made—and reported on the news—by foreign actors. What these non-U.S. views mean for public opinion and foreign policy is a matter worthy of considerable further study. But a key initial step in this research agenda is to interrogate dominant models of news content, which, in turn, requires a rigorous empirical explication of the prevalence and dynamics of foreign and domestic voices in American mass media.

Mass Media Content and Public Opinion

Two major theories of media content during foreign policy debates have characterized recent work in political science and communications studies. Bennett’s (1990, 1994, 1996, 2007; see also Hallin, 1994; Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2006, 2007; Zaller and Chiu, 1996) indexing hypothesis suggests that news outlets tend to mirror the range of ideological and policy perspectives expressed by actors in institutional politics, most prominently the president, key administration officials, and congressional representatives of the two major parties. Thus, if members of the opposition party in Congress fail to widely and vociferously question or dissent from administration positions, mass media usually will disseminate an essentially one-sided policy discussion. Indexing also suggests that when partisan elites fail to divide, this apparent consensus will be reinforced in major media by analyses from sympathetic policy experts, interest groups, and other sources.

More recently, Entman (2003, 2004) has proposed the cascading activation model as a theory that builds on indexing but allows more room for journalistic independence and the raising of critical perspectives in a post-Cold War context, even in the absence of prominent debate among institutional elites. Entman (2004) argues that especially under conditions in which international events and issues are culturally and ideologically ambiguous (i.e., when the lack of a longstanding consensus paradigm makes it difficult for White House officials to dominate framing) news organizations are likely to amplify and multiply critical perspectives from elite political opponents. Journalists will also occasionally take the initiative to raise their own criticisms or seek them out from experts and others beyond the government. His strongest evidence for this dynamic is generated from the period between the end of the Cold War and the September 11 attacks, encompassing Clinton administration policies in Somalia (1993), Haiti (1994) and the Balkans (1993–1999) (Entman, 2004, pp. 93–107). Entman (2004, pp. 76–94) also finds substantial pro- and anti-administration framing balance during a significant portion of the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf War debate, but the vast majority of criticism in this case was “procedural” rather than “substantive,” and few media voices raised fundamental questions about U.S. aims in the region. Moreover, most critical assertions here were confined to the prestige newspapers—especially their editorial or op-ed pages—not mass media like nightly TV

news. Thus, despite some important departures from indexing theory, the broad outlines of Entman's model and the bulk of his evidence point to a framing process dominated by elite sources—and mostly those in positions of official government authority—other than under arguably exceptional geopolitical conditions.

Both Entman's and Bennett's theoretical frameworks are built in part on journalists' tendency, supported by literature on professional news media norms and practices, to rely heavily on official sources for information and policy perspectives, particularly political elites with institutional decision-making authority (e.g., Sigal, 1973; Gans, 1979; Bennett 2007). This institutional bias is also evident in news coverage of interest groups and social movement organizations (SMOs). Interest groups, with the exception of a few of the largest and best-financed, typically garner scant attention. And media outlets rarely give voice to SMOs' substantive policy positions or political values. Instead, more attention is drawn to eccentric leader personalities and to features of apparent cultural and social deviance—especially nonconformist styles of dress and personal appearance, property damage or confrontations with police, and disapproving statements from citizen bystanders and authorities (Gitlin, 1980; Shoemaker, 1991; McLeod & Hertog, 1992; Hallin, 1994).³

The extent and range of policy debate by political actors in mass media is important because of the role news coverage plays in shaping public opinion. While focused most closely on micro-level processes of attitude formation, Zaller's (1992) prominent model reserves a key role for mass communications—especially debate by partisan leaders—in shaping responses to opinion polls in a dynamic that takes in levels of general political knowledge and media reception, ideological predispositions, and elite messages. Because foreign policy issues are less easily connected to citizens' daily lives and personal experiences (Gamson, 1992; Page, 1996), relatively more susceptible to state control of information (see Page & Shapiro, 1992, esp. chapter 9), and typically characterized by calls for national unity (e.g. Mueller, 1973), the extent and magnitude of media coverage of elite debate in this domain is arguably of even greater importance to mass opinion formation in the context of democratic politics. For instance, in his case study of the Vietnam War, Zaller (1992) shows that it was only after elites—especially Democratic leaders—began questioning and criticizing the war did extensive mass polarization on the issue occur. In a study of World War II and Vietnam that builds on but qualifies Zaller's (1992) model, Berinsky (2007) argues that elite cues are the dominant mover of public opinion—even in the absence of widespread partisan debate in the mass media, he argues, a few prominent elite opposition voices can be sufficient to induce dissent from foreign policy adventures among ordinary citizens.

Reconsidering the Irrelevance of Foreign Voices

For the most part, however, such studies have focused exclusively on the media's transmission of domestic elite debate, especially exchanges between the executive and legislative branches (e.g., Groeling & Baum, 2008). The prevailing assumption is that nondomestic voices are irrelevant in explaining Americans' foreign policy attitudes. This appears to be so for two primary reasons.

First, the voices of foreign actors tend to be marginalized by American journalists, who rely mainly on the viewpoints of domestic political actors as grist for the news mill. Newsgathering routines structured by a handful of government beats and journalists' focus on the political actors who possess authority to set national policy contribute to this tendency (Cook, 2005; Sigal, 1973). As a result, Americans are unlikely to be exposed to the views of actors from outside U.S. government officialdom. Second, in the event that

the perspectives of international figures do appear in the news, they are likely to be accorded little credibility by the American public—either because of a low “default” level of legitimacy or because mass media during policy debates explicitly portray foreign actors as hostile to U.S. interests—rendering them inconsequential as opposition cues for mass attitude formation and change.

Such a perspective, however, may be problematic for two reasons. First, most studies that conclude that foreign discourse exerts little influence on U.S. public opinion were conducted against the backdrop of the Cold War (e.g., Page et al., 1987). With the United States and its allies aligned against an apparently threatening and monolithic Soviet superpower, geopolitical conditions made it less likely that American journalists would seek out voices from abroad, especially those who might offer commentary critical of U.S. foreign policy. But with the collapse of the Soviet Union, media outlets may feel less pressure to adhere only to voices friendly to U.S. interests (Entman, 2004). In the wake of this collapse, Livingston and Eachus (1996) argue that because there is now more disagreement regarding American foreign policy, more opportunities exist for dissent to both be voiced by political actors and sought out by journalists. “The relatively tight ideological consensus of the Cold War has given way to a divergent array of competing positions,” they write (p. 425). “‘Normal’ politics have been replaced by debates about the fundamental orientations of American foreign policy.” In such an environment, foreign affairs coverage may encompass an increasing number of oppositional perspectives, including more commentary by actors from outside the Beltway, even from across the water’s edge. Similarly, Althaus et al. (1996) declare that in this new era “the concept of ‘official debate’ must be expanded to include foreign elites” because international institutions and foreign countries are likely to have greater influence over American policy in a “decentered, destabilized, international political system” (p. 418).⁴

Increased journalistic attention to foreign actors should be especially likely when U.S. elites unify in support of a policy being challenged by prominent international figures, such as European heads of state or United Nations officials. In the absence of domestic elite debate, journalists are unlikely to be satisfied with a one-sided narrative supporting a single policy perspective. In an effort to craft stories that meet minimum professional standards of newsworthiness, reporters may seek out oppositional voices as a way of injecting into their stories a semblance of balance and conflict—key aspects of the contemporary journalistic narrative (Althaus, 2003; Althaus et al., 1996). Althaus’s (2003) study of television news coverage during the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf crisis found that the level of opposition reported in the media was not directly related to changes in criticism originating in the U.S. government. Instead, much of the opposition was attributed to sources outside the United States (Althaus, 2003, pp. 390–397). Althaus et al. (1996) drew similar conclusions in their study of the 1985–1986 U.S.-Libya crisis. And Entman’s (2004, 50–75) analyses of *New York Times* and network TV coverage during the Libya episode, as well as the U.S. invasions of Grenada (1983) and Panama (1989–1990), demonstrated a heavy reliance on foreign sources for oppositional discourse in the absence of significant congressional dissent from administration policies, even in the context of the late Cold War.⁵

The nature of the 2002–2003 Iraq debate makes it particularly conducive to the inclusion of foreign discourse. Much of the discussion in the months leading up to the invasion focused on the effectiveness of UN sanctions, whether Iraq had violated the sanctions, standards of evidence for the existence of weapons of mass destruction, and other technical details involving international law and regulations. Thus, from the perspective of dominant news norms, UN and other foreign officials were not merely components of an

amorphous “other side” in the debate. They were instead central to the development of the story, a role that would have made them attractive sources for journalists closely attuned to which political actors possess the levers of power (e.g., Cook, 2005; Entman & Page 1994, pp. 93–94). And while many of these sources were not friendly to U.S. policy, it is hard to imagine that reporters would have ignored the very actors—weapons inspectors and members of the UN Security Council, among others—who were potentially decisive to the resolution of the Iraq drama. In addition, with international critics of the Bush administration publicly airing their disagreements on a nearly daily basis, these presumably made for irresistible news hooks for American reporters.

A second reason to concern ourselves with foreign voices in the news is their potential relevance for public opinion. As stated above, the scholarly consensus seems to be that foreign elites have no effect on domestic public opinion, summed up in Page et al.’s (1987) finding that “U.S. citizens apparently do not listen to foreigners directly but only through interpretations by U.S. opinion leaders” (p. 32). Since foreign leaders may be opposed to U.S. interests, and because domestic elites are more credible sources than foreign ones, public opinion will not respond to the reported positions of nondomestic elites. But there is good reason to suspect that those voices are more important than often assumed, especially in cases like the debate over the invasion of Iraq.

Our suspicions here rest on the fact that people tend to be receptive to information that confirms the beliefs they already hold (e.g., McGuire, 1968) and that individuals are most likely to respond to messages that resonate with their existing predispositions (e.g., Zaller, 1992). If domestic opposition in the prewar period was as scant as the conventional wisdom holds, then anti-war views emanating from non-American elites may have taken on credibility among U.S. citizens skeptical about the wisdom of a preemptive strike against Iraq. Polling data from the prewar period suggest that many Americans resisted a rush to war. While survey results were complicated and in some cases apparently contradictory, data reported by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (2003) showed strong preferences for multilateralism and a desire to let weapons inspections run their full course (see also Page & Bouton, 2006). In what was essentially a domestic oppositional vacuum, foreign voices may have filled the anti-war space and given like-minded Americans elite messages with which to elaborate and confirm their views. To be sure, if opposition from Democratic elites had been vociferous, Americans with anti-war views presumably would have been responsive to those messages, and not the protests of foreign elites. But in their absence, it is conceivable that Americans skeptical of unilateral military action and relatively open to international dialogue and cooperation would have been willing to take cues from international leaders espousing views consistent with these predispositions.

Source credibility is central to attitude formation (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Petty, Priester, & Brinol, 2002), and not all foreign actors, of course, will be credible to even the most anti-war Americans. Opposition from foreigners portrayed or perceived as ill-informed or hostile to U.S. interests would likely have limited influence. The protests against an invasion by Saddam Hussein and his underlings, for example, certainly fit this description. Even before the Iraq debate began, Americans viewed Hussein as “public enemy no. 1” (Althaus & Largio, 2004), at least partially a vestige of the first Gulf War and the frequent news media associations of the Iraqi leader with Adolf Hitler (Dorman & Livingston, 1994). Regime officials’ arguments against an invasion seem unlikely movers of public opinion regardless of the force of their invective. In Hallin’s (1994) terminology, Iraqi officials and their perspectives lay in the journalistically and politically defined “sphere of deviance.”

And certainly many Americans viewed unfavorably leaders of other foreign countries who openly criticized the Bush administration. But survey data suggest that at least in the initial months of the debate, the public did not uniformly hold foreign opponents of the invasion in low regard. In December 2002, a Gallup Poll asked respondents if they had gained or lost respect for various countries during the debate over Iraq. About France, 26% of respondents said they had lost respect, but 19% said they had gained respect during the course of the debate. Thirty-five percent said their opinions had not changed. The pattern was similar for Germany and Russia, whose leaders were also critical of the Bush administration. The same proportion—20%—said they had gained and lost respect for the Germans, and about Russia, 25% said they had gained respect, while just 14% said they had lost respect.⁶ These data are not evidence that anti-war Americans took cues from foreign elites. But they belie a picture of a public automatically disposed to ignore or reject statements from the leaders of these countries. The anti-war orientations of these nations even appear to have boosted their esteem among some citizens, suggesting that significant numbers of Americans may have taken seriously the viewpoints of nondomestic actors.⁷

In this article, we do not claim to show that foreign voices shaped public opinion. But we argue that sufficient evidence exists to consider their relevance, given the increasing attention scholars suggest they should receive in post-Cold War policy disputes. In addition, there are strong theoretical and empirical reasons to suspect that international voices could have served as important sources of predisposition-consistent information for Americans who were inclined to oppose a preemptive war on Iraq.

There has been a substantial volume of research on U.S. public opinion toward the Iraq War, but surprisingly, very little has involved comprehensive and systematic analyses of mass media content, especially television coverage in the pre-war period. Thus, there is a need for a systematic and relatively comprehensive analysis of U.S. network TV coverage in the period before the Iraq War. While the elite newspapers—because of their reputation as paragons of journalistic excellence—have taken much of the heat over pre-war coverage (e.g., Massing, 2004), the major television networks have not escaped unscathed. In fact, scholars have suggested that TV coverage was more uncritical of Bush administration claims and perspectives on Iraq than were print outlets (Bennett et al., 2007, Feldman, Huddy, & Marcus, 2007), and there is evidence that citizens who relied on network news were significantly more likely to hold incorrect beliefs about the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (Kull, Ramsay, & Lewis 2003–2004). Especially in light of the fact that network TV remains the dominant source for Americans' news about politics and public policy (see Graber, 2006), a careful account of pre-Iraq War coverage in this medium is essential for furthering our understanding of the run-up to the invasion, as well as the mass media's role in foreign policy debates and the shaping of public opinion more generally.

What issues and topics did the evening news focus on in the months before the invasion? How favorable or unfavorable toward the Bush administration's positions was this coverage? And perhaps most importantly in light of major theories of media content, how many of what kinds of sources were quoted, and what were they telling American television audiences about the Iraq issue? In short, whose views made the news? Few questions are more important for research on media content, public opinion, or the health of American democracy.

Data and Research Design

In order to answer these questions, we conducted a systematic content analysis of network TV coverage in the months before the start of the Iraq War. We chose to analyze coverage

on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news programs from August 1, 2002, through March 19, 2003, the day the invasion began. First, we used the LexisNexis database to select every story that appeared on these programs and contained the keyword “Iraq.” We then dropped from the sample any of these reports whose main focus was not the Iraq War—for example, stories about national economic conditions that mentioned the looming war briefly and in passing. This left us with 1,434 stories from *ABC World News Tonight* (411), the *CBS Evening News* (498), and *NBC Nightly News* (525). Thus, we have analyzed the entire plausible universe of stories on Iraq that appeared on these three programs for a period of approximately 7.5 months. While reports on a possible war with Iraq certainly appeared in the mass media before August 2002, we chose to begin our study at this point because it coincides roughly with the start of the Bush administration’s concerted strategic communications campaign promoting the war. In addition, because we want to provide a foundation for further research into possible media effects on mass opinion regarding the invasion, it was sensible to begin at a time when widespread public attention was first being directed toward the possibility of military action.

For each report, we coded for six major elements: (a) primary topical focus, (b) secondary topical focus,⁸ (c) identity of each source,⁹ (d) source category (e.g., Bush administration official, United Nations official, military source, policy expert), (e) directional thrust of each source’s statement in relation to the Bush administration’s position on Iraq, and (f) directional thrust of the story as a whole. We will address the major coding procedures and criteria here. Lists of story focus and source designation codes are provided in the Appendix.

For the directional thrust of source statements, we used one of three possible codes: supportive of the Bush administration’s policy, neutral, or opposed to the Bush administration’s policy. A statement was coded “supportive” if it expressed a position or perspective, or communicated a piece of information, that favored the Bush administration’s Iraq policy. A statement was coded “opposed” if it expressed any skepticism, criticism, or opposition to administration policy. A statement was coded “neutral” if it had no identifiable directional thrust.

Two points should be stressed here. First, our main criterion for directional thrust was to attempt to identify the likely implication of the statement regarding the Iraq War debate. Thus, a statement asserting or suggesting that Iraq possessed biological weapons was coded as supportive, even if it did not explicitly advocate going to war. At the same time, any statement that cast doubt on the Bush administration’s Iraq positions was coded as opposed, even if it did not either directly or indirectly question the idea of war per se. For instance, if a source said that the Bush administration had not yet secured an adequate coalition of allies to attack Iraq, the statement was coded as opposed. Or, if a source said that the administration was rushing toward war precipitously, and should first seek the return of weapons inspectors to Iraq under UN auspices, it was coded as opposed. Our coding scheme thus captures both procedural criticisms—those that criticized the way the Bush administration was going about its efforts—and substantive criticisms—those that directly challenged the wisdom of military action (see Entman & Page, 1994; Entman, 2004). The coding scheme for directional thrust of source statements was deliberately designed to be liberal, in the sense that the procedure was constructed to capture even faint signals of dissent regarding Bush administration policy on Iraq.

In determining the directional thrust of each story, we selected from one of five possible codes, ranging from “very favorable” to “very unfavorable.” This variable was designed to capture the likely overall effect on the opinion toward war with Iraq of the typical American viewing the news report. We combined three main factors in identifying the directional

thrust of each story, using neutral as the presumed starting point: the first was the overall balance of directional thrusts of the source statements included in the story. Thus, if a report contained more statements positive toward Bush administration policy than statements that were negative, this would tend to push the story's directional thrust in the favorable direction. The second was the likely effects of essentially neutral information contained in the news report. In other words, aside from the direction of statements from sources, we asked in what direction the information or events contained in the report would likely push the typical American news viewer's opinion toward a possible war. Thus, if a story was based largely on intelligence reports alleging Iraqi nuclear weapons capabilities, this would push the story's directional thrust in the favorable direction. The third was the overall "tone" of the report. This criterion was intended to capture more nuanced elements of the story—beyond the balance of favorable and unfavorable sources, and beyond the presumably factual information provided—that might influence viewers' opinions. These elements included the implicit assumptions upon which the story appeared to be based and the tone of the language used by anchors and reporters. Thus, when journalists themselves suggested that Iraqi officials were attempting to deceive the United States or the international community about their weapons programs, or when Dan Rather asked if it was time yet to "drop the hammer on Saddam," this would tend to push the directional thrust of the story in the favorable direction.

While many of these criteria unavoidably involve elements of human interpretation, we chose this kind of coding scheme in order to capture a large number of distinct and potentially important elements contained in news stories that are not likely reachable through computerized content analysis programs. We do not claim to be comprehensive in our approach to analyzing the content of TV news coverage before the Iraq War, only more comprehensive and more systematic than any previous studies we are aware of. Our approach is unusual in two ways. First, we coded the full text of essentially every news report on the policy issue over a several months' long period of public debate, rather than following the typical practices of sampling stories and coding just headlines, abstracts, or lead paragraphs. This is especially important in light of our suspicion that nondomestic sources may have constituted the primary source of reported opposition to the Bush administration. Studies of media discourse that rely on television abstracts or sample only portions of coverage run the risk of underestimating the frequency of foreign sources in the news (Althaus, 2003).

Second, we collected data on a large and diverse set of media content elements that might be important in shaping public opinion, rather than, for example, simply coding at the story level for overall favorability.¹⁰ While labor intensive, our strategy is optimal when aiming to provide a foundation for understanding how and to what extent media coverage may have affected citizens' policy views and political perceptions. We note that despite the various aspects of coder judgment involved in this effort, we have achieved acceptable levels of intercoder reliability on all of our key variables.¹¹

Volume of Coverage

Before presenting data on the focus of Iraq coverage, the sources and nature of quotes, and the direction of that coverage, it is useful first to document the increase in the amount of news the American public had at its disposal over the course of the debate over military action. As noted, our coding begins August 1, 2002, the month the Bush administration began its public push for a confrontation with Saddam Hussein over his alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction. Figure 1 displays the number of stories aired on the three networks during each of the 8 months in the lead-up to the war.

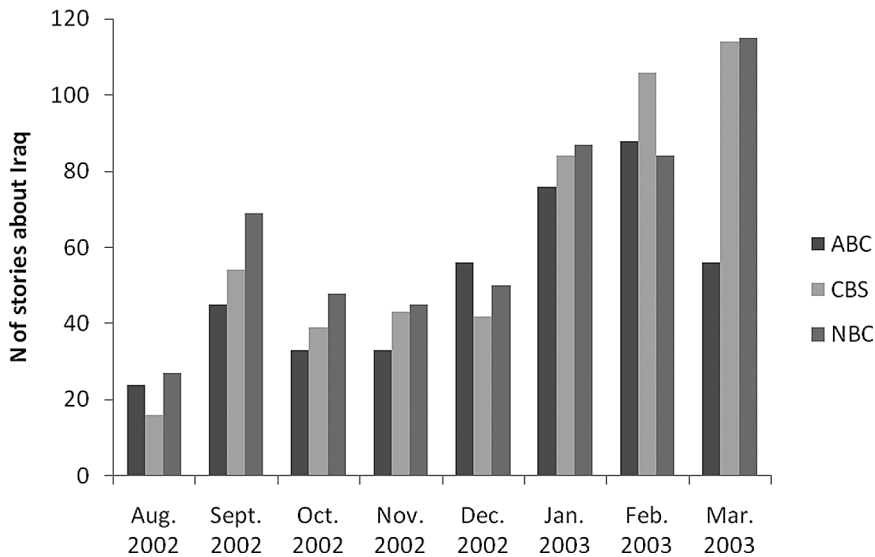


Figure 1. The increasing amount of pre-war network news coverage. Figure presents the number of stories about Iraq aired on the ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly news programs from August 1, 2002, through March 19, 2003.

The debate over Iraq garnered considerable attention from the outset. In August, a story appeared roughly every other night on each network. The number of Iraq stories grew steadily over the coming months, as the focus turned from the debate over giving Bush the authority to use military force, to the debate over a UN resolution, to the ongoing saga of weapons inspections, and finally the planning for the war itself. In February 2003, the month before the invasion, each network aired an average of more than three stories per night about Iraq.¹²

The substantial attention to the issue is notable. Iraq represents the rare case in which television news was actively involved in covering a policy debate. For the most part, debates over public policy largely go unreported by the broadcast media, for reasons of perceived audience taste, journalistic standards of newsworthiness, and the constraints of an inherently visual medium. In the case of Iraq, the networks were intensely interested, reflecting the heightened concern over terrorism less than a year after the September 11 attacks, the prospect of another military conflict at a time when the United States was involved in attempting to build a democratic government in Afghanistan, the first major test of the “doctrine of preemption” laid out by the Bush administration, and a policy debate whose outcome was correctly seen as having high-stakes consequences. The news is nothing if not responsive to controversial, dramatic political developments addressing questions of war and peace.

The amount of coverage is also important because it suggests that television news had the potential to influence public opinion about the wisdom of an invasion. Media content can affect public support for policy proposals, but only when the volume of coverage is sufficiently high. And since TV news only occasionally devotes sustained attention to policy debates, its ability to shape public opinion is necessarily attenuated. Here, that is not true: Americans likely learned much about the debate over Iraq from TV news, which makes it possible that what they saw and heard influenced support for and opposition to an invasion.

Focus of Coverage

We turn now to the content of those news reports. Figure 2 displays the distribution of the focus of stories, presented as the proportion of all Iraq coverage on the networks. Both primary and secondary foci are reflected in the figure. In other words, we have aggregated both foci together.¹³ We have also aggregated the three networks together; inspection of ABC, CBS, and NBC's attention to Iraq-related themes showed considerable homogeneity, a tendency well documented elsewhere (see Graber, 2006).

Over the 8 months of coverage, stories about the UN arms inspection efforts and Iraq's alleged possession of, or attempts to acquire, weapons of mass destruction were the most prominent themes. More than one in five stories (22%) focused on weapons inspections or WMD. Stories about the level of support from the international community and the prospects and planning for the war—the likelihood of an American victory and the build-up of troops in Kuwait, for example—grew more common after the end of 2002, and made those topics the second, third, and fourth most common themes. The explicit congressional, international, and political debate over the invasion itself was certainly a part

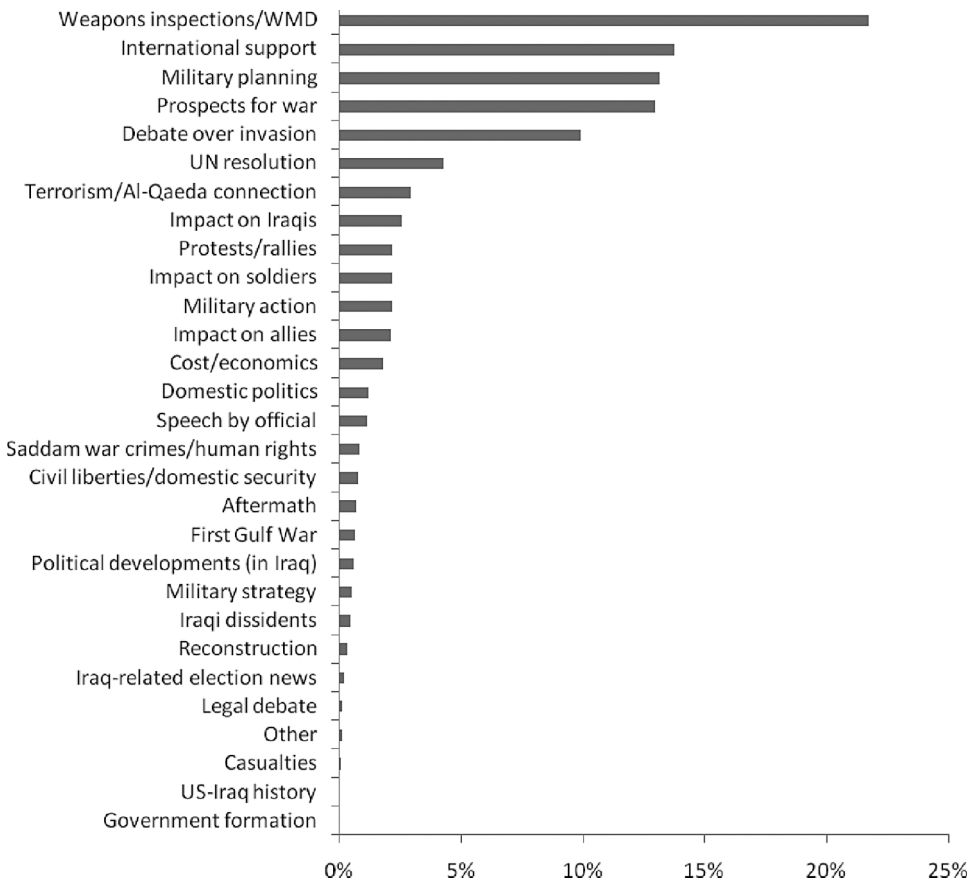


Figure 2. Focus of pre-war network news stories. Figure presents the percentage of stories with a primary or secondary focus on each topic on the ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly news programs from August 1, 2002, through March 19, 2003. Categories that did not receive attention in at least 1% of stories have been omitted. The entire list of focus categories appears in the Appendix.

of the coverage, but stories focused on the arguments for and against an invasion—either as primary or secondary foci—were much less common than stories about military planning or the allegations about weapons in Iraq. To be sure, about 12% of the stories that focused primarily on WMD included a secondary focus on the debate. But the overall lower level of attention to the debate reveals that the exchanges between political actors on either side were much less prominent than dramatic claims about the purported threat from Iraq.

The overall distribution of the media's attention, however, obscures the dynamics of coverage. When we examine the data over time, we find that the networks' interest in the Iraq question evolved during the pre-war period. Figure 3 shows the proportion of stories on all of the networks that had a primary focus on the explicit debate over a possible invasion, weapons, and military planning, for each month of coding.¹⁴ In the initial phase of coverage—in August and September—explicit debate over possible military action was the dominant topic. Forty-seven percent of news reports in August and 32% in September were focused primarily on the arguments about how to deal with Iraq among the Bush administration, foreign officials, and a few Democrats. In October and beyond, however, the debate over the invasion faded into the background, as weapons inspections and WMD became the main objects of journalistic attention. During the month of December, 58% of all Iraq news was focused on the inspections. As the war grew closer, the networks turned their attention to military maneuvering in the Middle East, focusing on the deployment of troops, the build-up of equipment, and other stories about military operations. By March, stories about weapons of mass destruction and any explicit debate over the war had virtually disappeared. The war was about to begin, and preparations for battle became the focus of TV journalists.

The ebb and flow of attention can be understood with reference to journalistic definitions of newsworthiness. In August and September, the Bush administration was spending

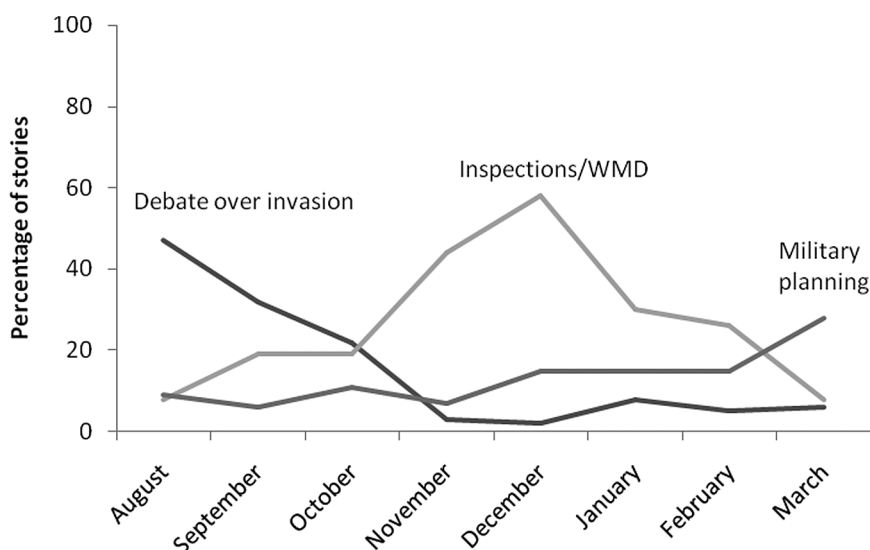


Figure 3. The changing focus of pre-war network news coverage. Figure presents the percentage of stories each month with a primary focus on each topic on the ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly news programs from August 1, 2002, through March 19, 2003.

most of its time making the case to the American public, foreign leaders, and members of Congress that Iraq was, as Bush put it in a September speech to the United Nations, a “grave and gathering danger.”¹⁵ While domestic opposition to an invasion, as we show in the next section, received little media attention, disagreement was prominent enough to make for a good story. But when the House and Senate passed a resolution in the second week of October authorizing Bush to use force in Iraq, debate stories ceased to be newsworthy according to standards of mainstream professional journalistic practice. Even as protestors continued to rally in opposition to the war, and even as some institutional critics of the Bush administration, such as West Virginia Democratic Senator Robert Byrd, persisted in their call for a nonmilitary solution to the impasse with Iraq, the political conflict over an invasion swiftly receded from public view. From the perspective of television news story selection, the debate, at least domestically, was settled.

As a result, the preponderance of news then turned to the question of weapons inspections: Would they proceed and avert the war, or would Iraq’s apparent obstinacy force the Bush administration to act on its congressionally sanctioned threats of military action? As the inspections wore on, and it became increasingly clear that the United States would not provide additional time for UN investigation of alleged Iraqi weapons programs, the media turned its attention to the war planning stories. As American troops began to mass in the Middle East, weapons inspections and debate over the invasion were relegated to old news, and the coming conflict became the new storyline.

News is news because it is new, so it should be no surprise that there were “media attention eras”—explicit debate, weapons inspection, military build-up—across the course of the pre-Iraq War period. Just as the attention to policy issues in the news rises and falls with the occurrence of dramatic, and sometimes idiosyncratic, events (Bosso, 1989; Downs, 1972), so can attention to different aspects of the same ongoing policy debate (Lawrence, 2000).

This pattern also fits with the tendency of reporters to “follow the trail of power” (Bennett et al., 2007; Cook, 2005; Entman, 2004). During congressional hearings before the first Gulf War in the fall of 1990, for instance, media gave substantial attention to Democratic criticism of the George H. W. Bush administration (Entman and Page, 1994). But once the hearings ended, reporters shifted their focus to the Bush administration’s actions and statements: “This may result from a definition of news in terms of helping audiences predict future events by focusing on actions, plans, and statements of the powerful,” Entman and Page (1994) write. “The assertions of those who have less power to affect future events are given secondary status even when what they say is substantively important” (pp. 93–94).

Similarly, Zaller (1999) suggests that reporters use a “rule of anticipated importance” in deciding what stories to cover, the frame of those stories, and the sources to quote. Since journalists are primarily interested in “shedding light on future developments” (Zaller, 1999, p. 61), they train their attention on the events and political actors expected to have the greatest impact on future outcomes, which in this case essentially means institutional elites—domestic and foreign—who appear to have power at particular points in the decision-making process.¹⁶ From that perspective, debate stories were relevant to journalists until Congress assented to the president’s wishes, at which point the explicit argument over whether an invasion should occur was less important in determining the policy outcome. The question, then, became whether the UN’s weapons inspection process would unfold in a way that would avert a war. Thus, the inspections had high “anticipated importance,” as they appeared at the time to have a significant bearing on the outcome of the stand-off between Iraq and the United States. Finally, when it became

clear that the Bush administration had lost patience with the process, the inspections were deemed no longer relevant to future developments. What mattered then was the build-up of American troops and prospects for success in the impending war, producing the uptick in military planning stories in Figure 3.

Sources and Quotes in Coverage

One of the most common criticisms of media coverage in the months before the war is that reporters were overly willing to accept the Bush administration's rationale for an invasion. Not only were journalists rarely skeptical of claims about WMD and Iraq's terrorist connections, critics have stated, but they simply gave more attention to pro-war than anti-war perspectives. "In the period before the war, US journalists were far too reliant on sources sympathetic to the administration," Michael Massing (2004) wrote in the *New York Review of Books*. "Those with dissenting views—and there were more than a few—were shut out." As a result, the argument goes, the American public was repeatedly told why an invasion was needed or why Saddam Hussein was a threat but was much more rarely exposed to anti-war arguments. As others have pointed out, part of the reason for this imbalance appears to have been the absence of organized, vocal dissent by prominent Democrats in Congress (Berinsky, 2007; Feldman et al., 2007), but the media themselves have also been the target of much criticism.

Our data allow us to examine the key questions systematically: Did pro-war views dominate anti-war perspectives? Were sources from, and sympathetic to, the Bush administration accorded prominence on the air at the expense of those opposed to the administration?

To answer these questions, we coded every attributed quote—either direct or indirect—from every source on the network news during the pre-war period. In all, we analyzed 6,089 "source quotes." Nearly every story included at least one source quote—just 1% had none—and 20% included as many as seven. We placed each source into one of 23 different categories, shown in the Appendix, and coded each quote as supportive of the Bush administration's policy, opposed to it, or neutral.

In the aggregate, the data flatly contradict the claim that dissenting views were literally "shut out" of news coverage. While the networks aired more quotes supportive of an invasion than opposed—34% were supportive, 29% opposed, and 37% neutral—the differences are minimal, small enough to cast doubt on the claim that television coverage was monolithically pro-war. Rather than giving airtime only to a single perspective, journalists appeared to adhere closely to the norm of balance, including nearly as many anti- as pro-war statements.¹⁷

Does this, then, suggest that actors across the entire political spectrum were given equal opportunity to air their divergent views about the war? Not exactly. Figure 4, which presents the number of all quotes from each source category, demonstrates that George W. Bush and his underlings, while not holding full sway over the news, garnered twice as much attention as any competing source. Administration officials comprised 28% of the networks' source quotes (a total of 1,718 in all). Bush himself was the source of more than half (53%) of all the quotes in the category, meaning that the president accounted for 15% of all statements in the pre-war period, more than any other single source. Not surprisingly, as shown by the shading of the bars, the vast majority of the quotes attributed to Bush and other administration officials—78%—were supportive of military action. Twenty-one percent were coded as neutral, and 1% as opposed.

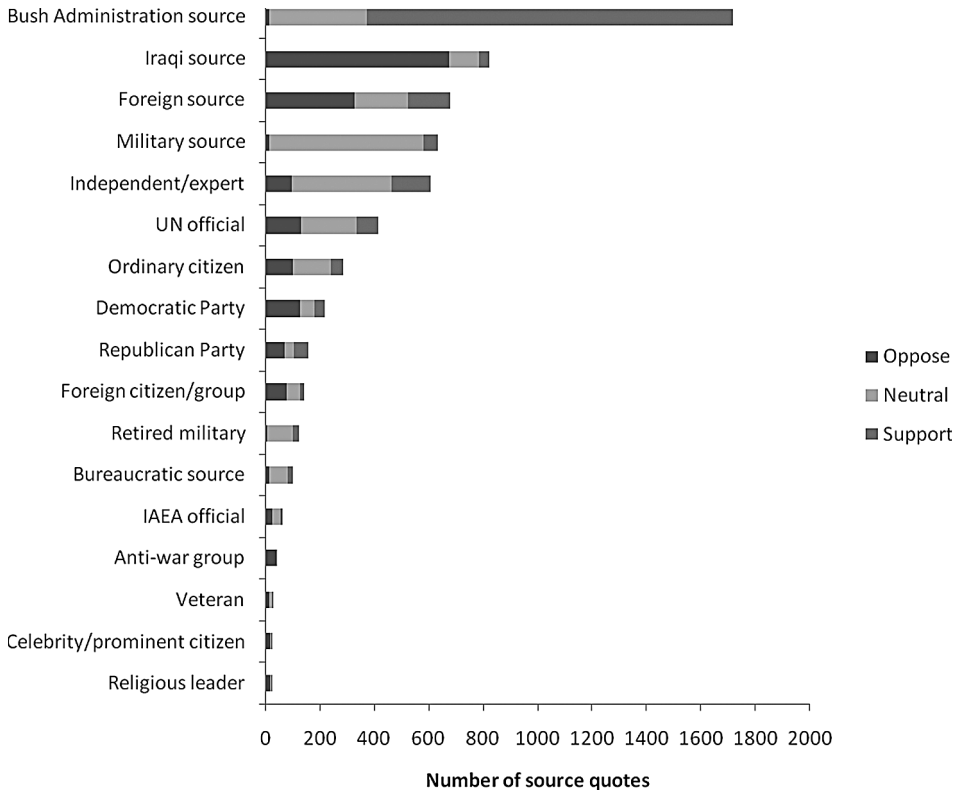


Figure 4. Distribution and direction of source quotes in pre-war network news stories. The figure presents the number of quotes attributed to each source category in Iraq stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly news programs from August 1, 2002, through March 19, 2003. The shading of the bars represents the number of each source category's quotes coded as supportive of, neutral toward, or opposed to the Bush administration's Iraq policy. Source categories that did not make up at least one-third of 1% of all quotes are omitted. A full list of source categories appears in the Appendix.

The extent to which the Bush administration was the primary carrier of the pro-war view is thrown into stark relief in Figure 5. Two-thirds—66%—of all supportive statements during the pre-war period were attributed to administration officials. A smattering of positive quotes came from foreign allies (8%), such as Britain, independent experts (7%),¹⁸ UN officials (4%), and military sources (3%). But when it came to the articulation of the rationale for possible military action, Iraq was truly “Bush’s war.”

However, given the overall nearly equal distribution of source quotes, it is clear that TV news carried opposition to the Bush administration's case. In light of the normative bases of dominant media content theories—including indexing—as well as everyday understandings of the operation of a free press, it would be natural to assume that this opposition to the White House came from the disaffected, and vocal, official opponents of the war—people like Byrd and Wisconsin Democratic senator Russell Feingold.¹⁹ In addition, opposition could have come from the anti-war groups that consistently opposed the prospect of military action against Iraq, or the ordinary American citizens who participated in the protests covered on television.

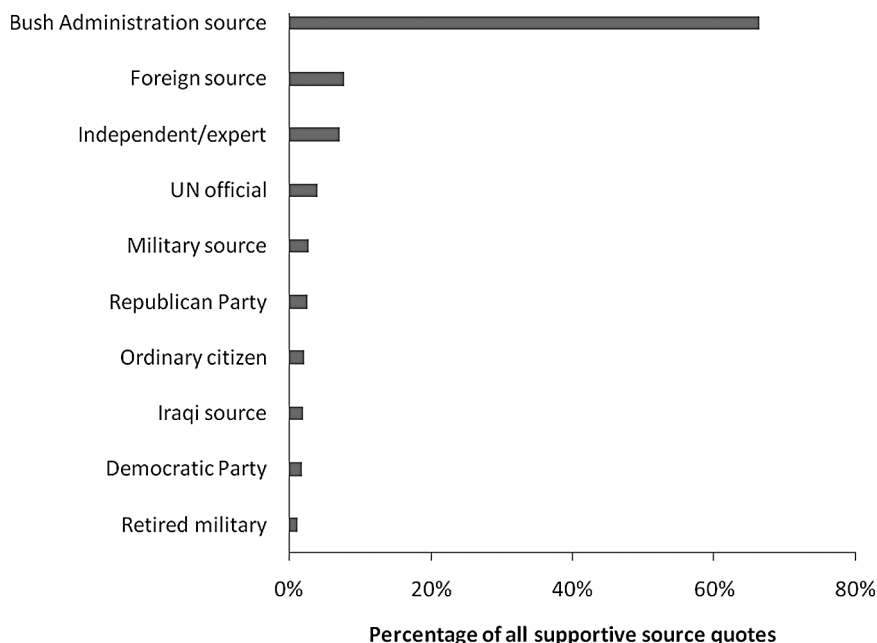


Figure 5. Sources of quotes supportive of the Bush policy in pre-war network news stories. The figure presents the percentage of all quotes supportive of the Bush administration's policy that were attributed to each source category in Iraq stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly news programs from August 1, 2002, through March 19, 2003. Sources that did not comprise at least 1% of all supportive quotes are omitted.

But Figure 4 shows that was not the case at all. Across the entire 8 months of our coding, we found just 214 quotes from representatives of the Democratic Party, a total of 4% of all 6,089 quotes. The position of most Democrats reported in the news was indeed against an invasion—57% of the party's quotes were opposed—but more than 40% of the statements were either supportive of an invasion (16%) or neutral (26%).²⁰

The most common source of dissent within the United States turned out to be ordinary citizens quoted in the news, often protestors at anti-war rallies or subjects of “man-on-the-street” interviews designed to gauge “public opinion” about Iraq. While 35% of the 282 American citizen quotes were opposed to an invasion and 15% were supportive, the category comprised just 5% of all source statements. And while sources identified as part of anti-war groups were, of course, uniformly opposed to an invasion, their statements comprised just 1% of all quotes, making such dissent a drop in the rhetorical bucket.²¹ Furthermore, as Figure 2 indicates, anti-war rallies and protests—in the United States and abroad—were either the primary or secondary focus of less than 5% of total stories during the period of analysis. These findings confirm those of previous studies indicating that mainstream media in the United States carry very little substantive coverage of protest groups and political demonstrations (e.g., Gitlin, 1980; McLeod & Hertog, 1992), but they are nonetheless striking in light of what were likely the largest pre-war protest actions in world history.

So, given the success of the White House in getting its views out to the American public through the media and the relative scarcity of reported dissent from Democrats, liberals, and anti-war groups, how did the distribution of source quotes end up so balanced?

As we have suggested, the answer, as shown in Figure 4, lies abroad. Opposition to the war was largely carried on TV news by Iraqi officials themselves and leaders of foreign countries, who were urging a diplomatic solution to the confrontation. The figure shows that Iraqis were the second most commonly quoted sources. The category, which accounted for 822, or 13% of all, source quotes, includes both ordinary Iraqi citizens and government officials, but is dominated by the latter. Nineteen percent of all Iraqi quotes came from Saddam Hussein himself, making him the source of 3% of all the pre-war TV news quotes—just a single percentage point less than all members of the Democratic Party. It is no surprise that the potential targets of an American invasion were strong opponents of military action.

Much of the remaining opposition or criticism emanated from leaders of other foreign countries, who accounted for 11% of source quotes overall. While British Prime Minister Tony Blair was consistently supportive of the Bush Administration—accounting for most of the 23% of supportive quotes from foreign officials—his fellow European leaders were not. French president Jacques Chirac, French foreign minister Dominique de Villepin, German chancellor Gerard Schroeder, and Russian president Vladimir Putin were regularly quoted opponents of an invasion. American TV reporters also quoted with regularity anonymous sources in foreign governments, many of whom were critical of the Bush administration. In the end, nearly half of the quotes from foreign officials (48%) raised concerns about the invasion of Iraq, making them the second most commonly quoted source of dissent.

Figure 6 shows the proportion of all opposed quotes that came from various sources. A plurality of opposition to the war came from Iraqi officials, who attempted to make the case that they did not possess WMD, did not have terrorist connections, and did not pose a threat to the United States or its allies. As a result, 40% of all anti-war quotes were attributed to Saddam Hussein and his associates. An additional 17% were attributed to foreign sources, including leaders in France, who became the administration's most prominent international critics. And UN officials, who urged the White House to allow the weapons inspections a chance to proceed, were the source of 8% of anti-war quotes.

One final point about the sources is worthy of mention: if we place each into two broader categories—official and non-official—we find that official sources comprised 79% of those quoted during the pre-war period.²² Nonofficial sources, such as ordinary citizens, conservative or liberal interest groups, and religious leaders, were much less prominent on television news. Even the largest category of nonofficial source—independent experts—were often individuals affiliated with major Washington think tanks, and an argument can be made that these organizations work in parallel with the government itself. The views of nonofficial actors were, in a word, marginalized. This is consistent with decades of work that shows reporters turn to governmental sources with far more frequency than nongovernmental actors (e.g., Sigal, 1973; see Graber, 2006). Such a pattern is particularly important in an environment in which there was relatively little domestic dissent within the government about the possibility of a war with Iraq.

Directional Thrust of Coverage

Finally, we turn to the overall “directional thrust” of coverage, a term we adopt from Page et al. (1987) to describe the positivity or negativity of a news story toward a proposed invasion. As described above, the coding was designed to capture not merely a measure of the story “tone,” but also the perspective that is emphasized by the theme of the report and the distribution of the various source quotes in the piece. This multidimensional measure

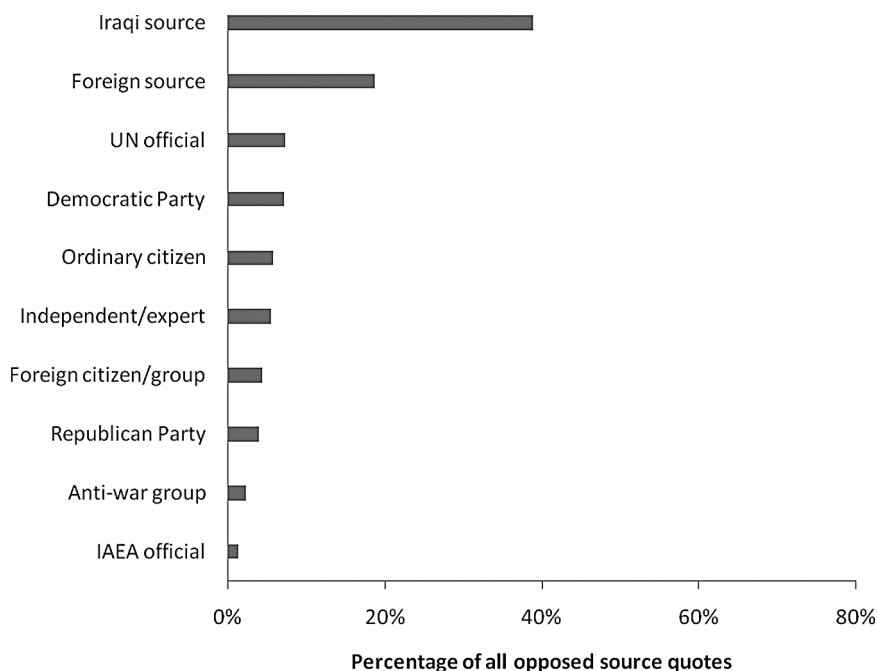


Figure 6. Sources of quotes opposed to the Bush policy in pre-war network news stories. The figure presents the percentage of all quotes opposed to the Bush administration's policy that were attributed to each source category in Iraq stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly news programs from August 1, 2002, through March 19, 2003. Sources that did not comprise at least 1% of all opposed quotes are omitted.

of directional thrust is superior to one that captures only a single element of media favorability (see, e.g., Hayes, 2008; Shaw, 1999).

Figure 7 presents the distribution of the directional thrust measure. The columns represent the percentage of coverage coded, left to right, as "very unfavorable" to "very favorable" on each network and on all of the networks aggregated together (rightmost grouping). Looking first at ABC, the network's coverage does not appear to stray far from the journalistic norm of objectivity. We coded two-thirds of ABC's coverage as neutral, and just 5% as very favorable or very unfavorable. However, of the coverage coded as "somewhat" directional, more than two-thirds fell into the favorable category, bolstering critics who saw the media's coverage of the Iraq debate as favoring the Bush administration's pro-war views. In general, however, ABC's coverage tended more toward neutrality than anything.

The same, however, was not true of CBS and NBC. We coded less than half of these two networks' coverage as neutral. Our reading of the transcripts reveals that CBS coverage, in particular, frequently exhibited a "march to war" tone, in which the invasion was portrayed as inevitable or even necessary. This tendency is well illustrated by Rather's "drop the hammer" comment referenced above and by a September 17, 2002, segment during which a correspondent asserted that "truth is a moving target" in the "Iraqi shell game," while likening Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz to a "Mississippi gambler" and warning viewers that Aziz "lit up a fat cigar" as he claimed that the regime welcomed full UN inspections. Interestingly, we find somewhat more pro-war coverage on one of the

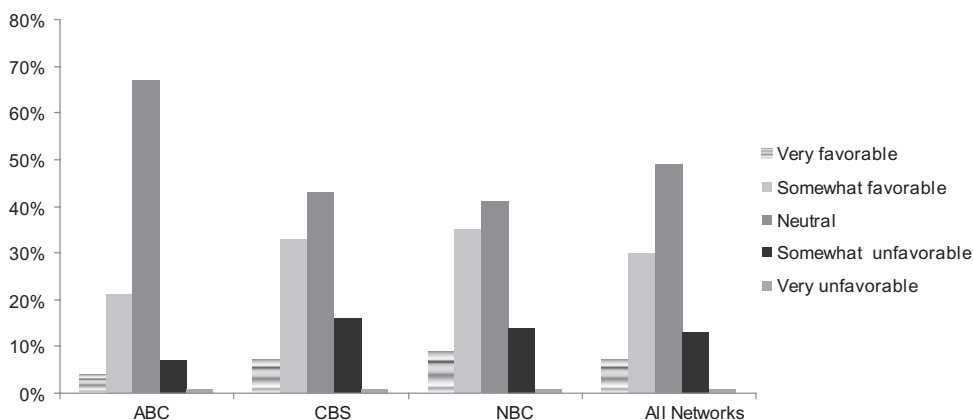


Figure 7. Directional thrust of pre-war network news stories. The figure presents the percentage of all Iraq stories coded, from left to right, as very unfavorable, somewhat unfavorable, neutral, somewhat favorable, and very favorable toward the Bush administration's policy on the ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly news programs from August 1, 2002, through March 19, 2003.

very networks that is traditionally accused by conservatives of being more liberal than its competitors (e.g., Goldberg, 2001).²³ At least where pre-war Iraq content is concerned, the opposite seems to be true: CBS and NBC viewers were exposed to a heavier dose of pro-war coverage than were ABC viewers.

But a cross-sectional analysis cannot reveal the dynamics of coverage. To investigate possible changes in the direction of coverage, we first created a scale, assigning a value of -2 to stories coded very unfavorable, -1 to stories that were somewhat unfavorable, 0 to stories that were neutral, 1 to somewhat favorable stories, and 2 to very favorable stories. We then averaged the directional thrust of all news reports aired on each day of our coding period (aggregating the networks together), and calculated a 3-day moving average of directional thrust. The trend is presented in Figure 8. Data points at the zero-line represent neutral coverage. Data points above or below show that coverage was tilted pro- or anti-war, respectively, at a given point in time.

On the whole, coverage was consistently favorable toward the Bush administration's position. Of our 221 data points, just 38 fell below the zero-line—that is, revealing coverage to be more unfavorable than favorable toward the prospect of an invasion. On 7 additional days, the average directional thrust of news reports was zero, meaning coverage was as balanced as possible. The remaining 176 daily averages—80% of the observations—yielded scores that favored the prowar position.

The data exhibit interesting dynamics, nonetheless. In the early months of the debate—in August and September—coverage was not consistently favorable toward a proposed invasion. Coverage was mostly positive for the first part of August, and turned slightly negative later in the month and through the middle of September. A surge in pro-war coverage occurred in mid-September with an equally precipitous decline late in the month, followed by an increase in early October. From that point on, dramatic fluctuations in the direction of coverage abated, with the overall thrust of the news leveling out at slightly favorable through the rest of the time series.

The time series is more volatile early in the period in part because the 3-day averages are based on fewer stories (see Figure 1). These fluctuations do not, however,

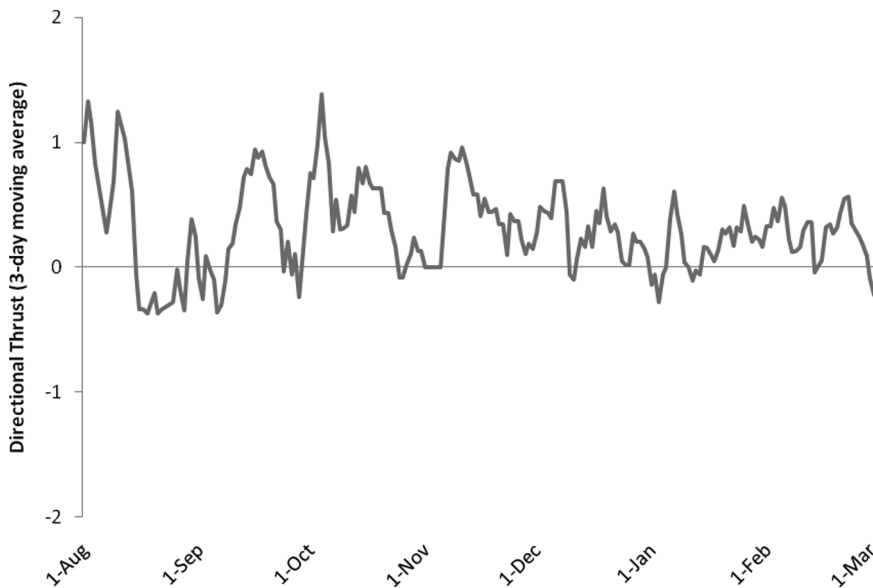


Figure 8. The dynamics of directional thrust in pre-war network news stories. Data points represent the 3-day average directional thrust score for news stories, expressed as a deviation from neutral coverage, on the ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly news programs from August 1, 2002, through March 19, 2003. Higher scores indicate coverage more favorable toward the Bush administration policy.

appear to be mere statistical artifacts. The greater skepticism in the news in August, September, and October reflects the fact that this was the moment during which explicit congressional debate was most prominent (see Figure 3). In this period, Democratic opposition to the war was most likely to be heard, whereas in the later months, it was virtually absent from the news. To wit, 44% of all Democratic source quotes were aired in August and September, meaning that in the remaining 6 months before the war, Democrats appeared on TV news with increasing rarity. As a result, coverage in August and September in particular, because it was primarily focused on the explicit debate over the war, was less favorable to an invasion than it would be in the rest of the pre-war period. The congressional debate ended in early October, with passage of the resolution authorizing the president to use force against Iraq. The House approved the measure on October 10, the Senate followed suit the next day, and Bush signed it on October 16.

The higher levels of favorability in November and December derive in part from the shift in the focus of coverage from the congressional debate to UN weapons inspections. With the attention trained on Saddam Hussein's alleged violations of international sanctions and UN resolutions, and the discussions of his possible use of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons, coverage increasingly reflected the views of those concerned about Iraq as a danger to American national security. As 2002 became 2003, inspections stories were replaced by reports about the Defense Department's preparations for an invasion. Most of the military planning stories were not directional—we coded 73% as neutral—as journalists focused on the mechanics of the mobilization. As a result, the directional thrust of coverage stabilized as the build-up continued, with the average remaining slightly favorable toward an invasion until the war began.

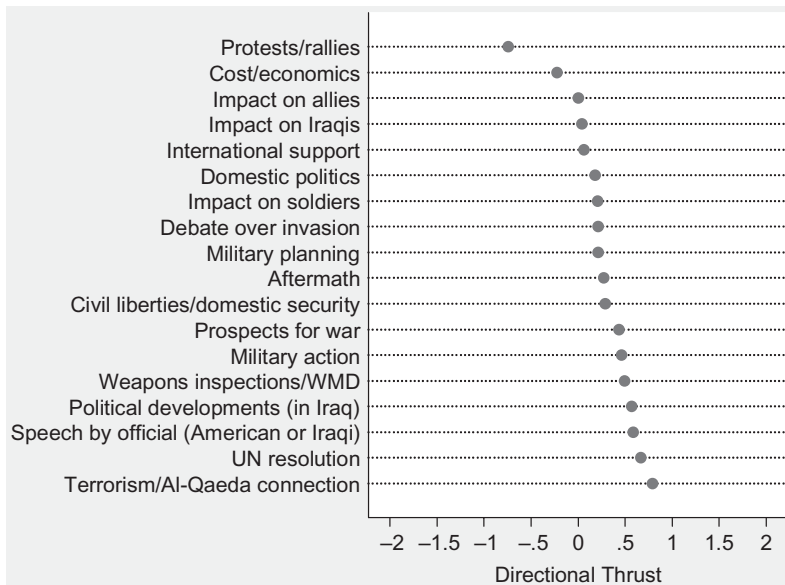


Figure 9. Average directional thrust, by primary story focus, in pre-war network news coverage. Data points represent the average directional thrust of news stories with a primary focus on each topic on the ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly news programs from August 1, 2002, through March 19, 2003. Higher scores indicate coverage more favorable toward the Bush administration policy. Categories without at least 10 stories are omitted. A full list of categories appears in the Appendix.

Though a precise explanation of the dynamics of directional thrust would require a detailed analysis beyond the scope of this article, we can add some support to our supposition that the change in the focus of the news media helps explain these patterns. Figure 9 presents the average directional thrust score for stories with a primary focus on 18 topics for which we found at least 10 reports.

Only in stories about protests and the economic costs of war did coverage fall into the unfavorable region. But focusing on three categories that comprised about 45% of coverage—the explicit debate over the invasion, military planning, and weapons inspections/WMD—the data are consistent with our suspicions. Of the three, coverage of the debate was the least favorable, although its average directional thrust score is not statistically distinguishable from neutral. Military planning stories were slightly more favorable. Weapons inspections/WMD stories, as expected, were most favorable. At the moments when news was focused on topics that were inherently about the pros and cons of going to war, coverage was least favorable toward an invasion. When attention turned to Iraq’s alleged misdeeds and its potential threat, coverage became more favorable, and when coverage then shifted to an essentially procedural narrative—the build-up of troops and the preparations for military action—coverage smoothed out while remaining slightly positive.

Conclusion

Our findings reveal that the general outlines of the criticism of the media in the run-up to the Iraq War are justified: news coverage, at least as exemplified by the network broadcasts, was more favorable toward the Bush administration’s rationale for war than its

opponents' arguments against. A plurality of news stories focused on Iraq's alleged weapons programs, administration officials were quoted more frequently than any other source, and our directional thrust analysis shows that TV news reports cast a possible invasion in a more positive than negative light. Only in the earliest months of the debate did domestic opposition receive much attention, and the focus on military planning beginning in January 2003 implied an inexorable march toward war. In sum, these findings support the view that the media's performance did not live up to the democratic standards most journalists hold themselves to, much less those expected by their critics.

In addition to producing the first systematic analysis of pre-Iraq War news coverage in the United States, our results also provide support for the predictions of the indexing model and associated theoretical literature. With relatively little debate among U.S. elites about the wisdom of invading Iraq, news coverage privileged the Bush administration's hawkish position. Alternative perspectives from actors within the United States—either from members of Congress or anti-war groups—were given scant air time.

At the same time, it is too facile to conclude that anti-war positions were completely marginalized. In contrast to the common critiques of media coverage, even as elites in the United States were not publicly sparring, journalists turned to foreign officials for the anti-war perspective. As a result, the overall distribution of quoted support for and opposition to the possibility of an invasion was essentially equal. Much of this criticism was spearheaded by Saddam Hussein and Iraqi officials, but a substantial amount of opposition was attributed to other foreign leaders and UN officials, who consistently argued for a diplomatic solution to the conflict. These findings validate a growing perspective in the political communication literature suggesting that the voices of nondomestic actors have become increasingly important in foreign policy debates, especially since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Our findings are much in line with those produced by Althaus and colleagues (Althaus, 2003; Althaus et al., 1996) in their studies of the first Gulf War and the Libyan crisis of the 1980s, as well as Entman's (2004) analysis of the latter episode and the conflicts with Grenada and Panama. These patterns recommend that scholars continue to devote attention to oppositional voices from overseas in media coverage about foreign policy issues.

Further investigation of the inclusion of non-U.S. voices during high-stakes foreign affairs debates promises to shed light on the determinants of news content and the various factors—both internal to media organizations and the news business, and emanating from the broader political or policy environment—that impinge on when, how, and to what extent news outlets will carry criticism of executive branch initiatives.²⁴ To that end, our study suggests the need for an additional stage of analysis that compares what domestic institutional elites were saying in Congress with the perspectives that actually made their way into mass media coverage of Iraq during the pre-invasion period. Only such an investigation can allow us to reliably assess the extent to which this policy case confirms or counters the theoretical expectations of prominent media content models, such as indexing and cascading activation.

But research on the inclusion of non-U.S. voices during policy debates is theoretically important for another reason. The construction of news stories that present foreign officials as the major sources of opposition to or criticism of U.S. overseas adventures raises interesting questions about possible effects on domestic public opinion. It is well known that source credibility is central to the persuasiveness of communication, political or otherwise (Hovland & Weiss, 1951; Petty et al., 2002). And while many Americans were skeptical of the Bush administration's motivations for a confrontation with Iraq (Feldman, Huddy, & Marcus, 2007), even greater skepticism infused their perceptions of Saddam Hussein's arguments about why war was a bad idea. To the extent that the anti-war view

was carried largely by “public enemy no. 1” (Althaus & Largio, 2004)—and sometimes surrounded by journalists’ suggestions that viewers would do well not to trust this view—it is likely to have had little influence in dampening public support for war. Indeed, it is plausible that such anti-war sentiment expressed by Iraqi officials may have triggered a backlash effect among some viewers, thus increasing support for Bush administration policy. In this connection, Hallin (1994) found that actors and perspectives that lie in the “sphere of deviance”—in other words, those considered outside the bounds of legitimate political debate—are the sources whose statements are most likely to be surrounded by unattributed journalistic commentary that explicitly or implicitly questions their credibility, as in the CBS news interview with Tariq Aziz presented above.²⁵

On the other hand, some studies (e.g., Berinsky, 2007) suggest that even a few prominent opposition cues from domestic political elites can be enough to induce dissent from administration positions among ordinary citizens whose basic predispositions align with those sources. If this is the case, then public opinion should have responded to these signals immediately before and during the congressional debate over the war resolution, even if the overall balance of domestic news voices before the invasion was decidedly in favor of the Bush administration. In addition, given existing theories of attitude formation, it is plausible to suggest that those citizens who were most habitually politically aware would be most likely to receive these critical communications carried in the media. But the ways in which different kinds of U.S. news viewers might respond to *foreign* sources of dissenting communications remains very much an open theoretical and empirical question. This suggests the need for analyses that closely examine patterns of public opinion before the Iraq War in relation to the specific news coverage dynamics we uncovered in the present study. For example, were self-identified Democrats, liberals, or even independents with high levels of general political knowledge likely to respond favorably to certain sources of criticism—such as European leaders—whose arguments they were predisposed to see as credible?

From a normative perspective, one might view pre-war Iraq coverage as a case of the media playing its watchdog role more effectively than the indexing argument suggests. Even in the absence of domestic elite dissent, the broadcast networks sought out sources with divergent views, giving the public access to a broader debate than was occurring inside the Beltway. But by going overseas for that perspective—to France, Germany, Iraq, and elsewhere—the anti-war view was accorded a difficult position, from the perspective of domestic public opinion. Thus, we do not suggest that the inclusion of foreign voices that dissent from aspects of U.S. policy constitutes an adequate substitution for the crucial role of domestic political leaders in promoting democratic accountability and robust public debate. But as we note, it is not clear that all Americans would have necessarily ignored foreign voices; it is indeed possible that those anti-war sentiments were taken quite seriously by people with predispositions leading them to be skeptical of a war. We simply do not know at this point. Further study of these issues both at the level of elite communications and at the level of citizen attitudes is certainly in order. However, the patterns that we explicate here clearly raise important theoretical and normative questions about how the news filters the communications of political actors and refracts—rather than merely reflects—the texture of elite debate.

Notes

1. But see Media Research Center (2008) for an alternative view of news coverage from a right-of-center perspective.

2. Our extensive search of political science and communications journals yielded very little sustained empirical research on U.S. media coverage in the months before the war. A number of studies

have investigated various aspects of the post-9/11 media environment, including the portrayal of Saddam Hussein (Althaus & Largio, 2004) and coverage of George W. Bush's speeches (Coe, Domke, Graham, Lockett, & Pickard, 2004), among others (Berinsky & Druckman, 2007; Calabrese, 2005; Feldman et al., 2007; Foyle, 2004; Neuwirth, Fredeick & Mayo, 2007; Rendall and Broughel, 2003). Other work has focused on coverage outside of the United States (Murray, Parry, Robinson, & Goddard, 2008; Robertson, 2004). But we found no studies employing systematic content analysis to document the overall tenor and thrust of U.S. coverage about Iraq in the critical pre-invasion period.

3. As Entman (2004) wrote of coverage on the 1982 nuclear freeze rally, which up to that point was the largest mass political demonstration in modern U.S. history: "In its key article on the event, nearly seventeen hundred words long, [the *New York Times*] made only two brief references to the speeches given at the rally in Central Park. The greater part of the article—replete with references to the frivolous and radical 1960s—focused on the logistics of moving the crowd and descriptions of the participants" (p. 141).

4. In this connection, Hallin (1994) found that non-U.S. voices constituted an extremely small portion of political actors who appeared in network TV news stories about Vietnam between 1965 and 1973. For example, South Vietnamese and other allied officials, on the one hand, and North Vietnamese and Communist guerilla leaders, on the other, each comprised less than 5% of total sources. While Hallin does not elaborate on this finding, it is plausible that the Cold War context of this conflict was a significant factor.

5. For example, Entman (2004, p. 55) found that during the Libya episode, critical assertions by non-U.S. sources outnumbered those by members of Congress by ratios of approximately 28:1 on the *CBS Evening News* and 22:0 in the *New York Times*.

6. These survey results were retrieved from the Roper Center Public Opinion Archives iPoll Databank.

7. It is true that the French, in particular, were vilified in the media after the UN rejected military action against Iraq. The most memorable development was the editing of the menu in the congressional dining hall so that it served "freedom fries." But this did not happen until March 11, just 9 days prior to the invasion. Before that, it appears that French and other foreign leaders continued to command respect from significant numbers of Americans.

8. We initially coded for a tertiary focus as well, but abandoned it after finding that few stories had three identifiable foci and that intercoder reliability ratings for the variable were low.

9. We coded both named and anonymous sources who were quoted directly and indirectly.

10. See Althaus (2003) for a notable exception to common limited media content coding practices.

11. Before beginning the coding, we conducted preliminary analyses to make sure our coding scheme could be reliably put into practice. In that process, we resolved any discrepancies or problems with the coding instructions. As the coding proceeded, we conducted two rounds of intercoder reliability tests, double-coding 5% of all stories. Our intercoder reliability ratings were generally within the accepted range for content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002). In the table below, we present Cohen's kappa, which adjusts for chance agreement, as a measure of reliability for each of our key variables. We achieved high reliability for all variables except the secondary focus of the story. The lower reliability on that measure stemmed from disagreement about whether stories did, or did not have, a secondary focus. As a result, we limit most of our analysis of the focus of coverage to the primary codes. But it should be noted that even when primary and secondary foci are aggregated together, the pattern of the media's attention to particular aspects of the war debate is substantively similar to when we use only the primary issue focus.

Variable	Cohen's kappa
Primary focus	0.78
Secondary focus	0.51
Source category	0.86
Directional thrust of quote	0.71
Directional thrust of story	0.71

12. We are aware of the significantly lower volume of coverage on ABC than on the other two broadcast networks during March 2003. In order to probe this discrepancy, we tried various search permutations that would pick up more ABC stories from LexisNexis than did our standard search terms. We also tried searching for content based on word counts, on the possibility that the database for some reason catalogs ABC coverage in a way that returns fewer discrete story records than the other two networks. None of these tactics yielded an explanation of the divergence. However, it is highly unlikely that this data anomaly had any significant impact on the overall results of our study.

13. For presentation purposes, we have omitted categories that did not receive at least 1% of coverage. The entire list of focus categories appears in the Appendix.

14. Of the four most prominent story topics, we set aside international support from the figure. Attention to that topic fluctuated relatively little from month to month.

15. See <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/09/20020912-1.html>.

16. See Entman (2004, pp. 88–89) for how this journalistic norm played out in the debate over the first Gulf War.

17. For reasons of style and concision, in several passages we use the term “anti-war” to refer to source quotes and stories that expressed skepticism of or dissent from Bush administration policy on Iraq. However, we reiterate that statements or news reports coded this way raised questions about whether an invasion was the proper course of action, but did not necessarily reflect direct or outright opposition to war with Iraq.

18. We use the term “independent experts” to refer to a broad array of nongovernmental actors. These included think tank researchers, former UN or U.S. officials who were not prominent political appointees or elected leaders, academics, and others. However, we do not mean to imply that these sources were necessarily “independent” in any deeper sense; in fact, many of them were affiliated with organizations that are commonly considered by scholars, political elites and others to have a liberal (e.g., the Brookings Institution) or conservative (e.g., the Heritage Foundation) orientation. However, we code these sources as experts on the presumption that the typical American news viewer—in the absence of journalistic cues that explicitly identify sources as ideologically aligned—is not likely to have the background information to see these actors as politically valenced.

19. See, for example, <http://www.senate.gov/~feingold/speeches/02/10/2002A10531.html>.

20. Though it appears that some anti-war Democrats, for strategic reasons, muted their public criticism of the White House (Rich, 2006), we cannot say whether the low level of dissent from party elites in the news accurately reflects “reality.” Such a claim would require a comparison between media coverage and the extent to which Democrats went on the public record—either in congressional floor speeches or elsewhere—in opposition to the war. An alternative explanation is that elite Democratic opposition to the war existed and was available to the media, but was ignored by television reporters. Regardless, our evidence confirms that citizens who turned to the broadcast networks for their news were very unlikely to hear Democratic dissent (Berinsky, 2007; Feldman et al., 2007).

21. We coded as “anti-war group” only those sources who were explicitly identified as members of such groups—for example, named spokespeople or leaders. Citizens who participated in protests or demonstrations but who were not identified as members or affiliates were coded as “ordinary citizen” (in cases of protests in the United States) or “foreign citizen/group” (in cases of events in other countries).

22. Official sources are Bush Administration sources, Iraqi sources, military sources, foreign sources, UN officials, Democratic Party elites, Republican Party elites, bureaucratic sources, IAEA officials, and NATO sources. The remaining sources are considered non-official.

23. And of course, Rather and CBS took much heat in 2004 for reporting questionable allegations regarding President Bush’s Vietnam-era service in the National Guard, behavior that was—according to some critics—driven by partisan bias.

24. On interactions between journalists and government officials in their organizational and institutional contexts during the run-up to the Persian Gulf War, see Cook (1994).

25. See also Kull et al. (2003–2004) for survey evidence showing that large majorities before the war believed (incorrectly) that the Iraqi regime possessed weapons of mass destruction and was

partially responsible for the September 11 attacks or actively cooperating with al-Qaeda. These misperceptions—which may in part be attributable to TV news coverage (see also Feldman et al., 2007)—in any case probably were both reflective of and responsible for Iraqi officials' low credibility among ordinary Americans.

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Appendix: Story Focus and Source Coding

Primary and Secondary Focus Codes

1 = Debate over invasion	17 = Cost/Economics
2 = UN resolution	18 = Impact on allies
3 = Weapons inspections	19 = Legal debate
4 = Military action	20 = Iraqi dissidents
5 = Protests/Rallies	21 = Military planning
6 = Casualties	22 = Domestic politics
7 = Government formation	23 = Impact on soldiers
8 = Political developments (in Iraq)	24 = Impact on Iraqis
9 = Reconstruction	25 = Civil liberties/Domestic security
10 = Speech by official (American or Iraqi)	26 = Terrorism/Al-Qaeda
11 = Military strategy	27 = Prospects for war
12 = Insurgent activity	28 = Aftermath
13 = Violence in Iraq	29 = First Gulf war
14 = Iraq-related election news	30 = Saddam war crimes/human rights
15 = Other	31 = U.S.–Iraq history
16 = International support	

Source Category Codes

1 = Republican Party	13 = UN official
2 = Conservative group	14 = Ordinary citizen
3 = Pro-war group	15 = Veteran
4 = Not aligned/Independent source/Expert	16 = IAEA official
5 = Anti-war group	17 = Bureaucratic source
6 = Liberal group	18 = Celebrity/Prominent citizen
7 = Democratic party	19 = NATO source
8 = Foreign official/Leader	20 = Foreign citizen/Group
9 = Iraqi source	21 = Religious leader
10 = Military source	22 = Local official
11 = Bush administration	23 = Other interest group
12 = Retired military	

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